A team around the New York based Architects Diller, Scofidio & Renfro (DS+R) won a competition for the Aberdeen City Garden in January 2012 together with OLIN and Keppie Design. The proposal supported by a private deed to the city passed a public referendum in the Scottish coastal town in March 2012 after a long controversy.

Local entrepreneur Sir Ian Wood has sponsored the project to transform the Union Terrace Gardens into a civic cultural centre with private funds. He said years ago to be interested in developing the city by attracting new business and industries to give Aberdeen a long-term perspective of prosperity as North Sea oil winds down in 10 to 20 years. The new centre is intended to generate an alternative kind of energy to ensure the city's – and Woods' own - wealth. His plan was always controversial – already before the competition project it fueled fears about privatization of public space. Opponents either defended greenery and existing trees or an alternative contemporary art project. Aberdonian Singer Annie Lennox, one of the critics of the project, claimed the 2010 decision of the city council to proceed with Woods' project through a competition regardless of negative poll results would be undemocratic “civic vandalism” (BBC 2010).

Despite the strong opposition against a single wealthy donor it now seems that the designers around DS+R have found just the right strategy to win the complex competition and (more importantly) the public referendum in the long run. Among DS+R’s shortlisted competitors where illustrious names such as Sir Norman Foster, West 8, Snohetta, Mecanoo and Gustafson Porter. All these designers integrated landscape and architectural elements to a large degree. I have never seen so many park and building hybrids in one competition – regardless of whether the designers had become famous in either Architecture or Landscape Architecture. But the jury's verdict seems to be based on "survival the fittest": DS+R proposed the most versatile and smart hybridization of all.

The winning scheme of DS+R's team took advantage of the dramatic topography of the city, linking entries from all sides to what now is a rather poorly accessible space in the Denburn Valley. The proposal is dominated by the strongly designed system of paths that criss-crosses like leaf veins over the whole plot. In plan their slightly rounded shapes look like a mixture of...
baroque and late romantic garden. The paths are activated three-dimensionally as an architectural system of raised roof edges and even load bearing beams. Organic shells and loosely detached bridges form strong dynamic shapes and in certain views the ungraspable becomes iconic – reminiscent of Saarinen’s 1950’s TWA Terminal at JFK Airport in which a grotto takes on the iconic form of a hill. Seen from an aerial viewpoint, the building or park appears to be inspired by the street axis of the Victorian urban plan of the around the Union Terrace Gardens.

The Park includes extensive programs for exhibition, theatre and spectacular indoor and outdoor activities. In a presentation Architect Renfro claims they are "Fusing Nature and Culture into a Rich Tapestry of varied Landscapes". This tapestry consist of patches that are connected by the path structure.

The references to Scotland’s Landscapes are by far not as literal and formal as in Miralles & Tagliabue’s Scottish Parliament (1999-2004) in Edinburgh, which I visited last summer. Miralles stressed the Scot-Land metaphor – an approach politically loaded with programme. DS+R’s Aberdeen Scheme by contrast, is more a kind of grid filled with programme with more formal reference to landscape design than that to natural landscape references in the Edinburgh scheme. Both designs however, rely strongly on connecting to the surroundings, but also here Miralle’s would seem to draw his reading from the natural landscape and DS+R more to rely on the polygonal, polycentric urban network. One could interpret the City Garden design as romanticized and rationalized - in a way very English approach towards Landscape Architecture. On the other hand the Scottish Parliament scheme is rather more of a personal and poetic (but nonetheless romantic) interpretation through the hand of the poetic expressionist artist/architect. The designers of the Aberdeen city gardens did well to any avoid resemblance to Edinburgh, not only to avoid the nearby city’s competition but also because the building costs of the Scottish Parliament turned out to be a financial nightmare.

As design attitudes, the schemes are actually quite difficult to compare. DS+R associates freely; they are smart and funny provocateurs and enduring strategists. The result is an almost surrealist mix-and-match of Landscape architectural history. One example is the repositioning of existing and new monumental statues: It reveals the old classic reference of the street pattern in of Sixtus V plan for Rome of 1588 with obelisks and statues in view. A perennial design tool that echoed all through Baroque in the great French garden designs and back through Hausmann’s Paris - with a resonance even in Aberdeen’s Street system.

The expectation of the scheme for 24-7 activity may be slightly exaggerated, the mapping of a Manhattan-style density of events into a relatively small
northern city of just above 200,000 inhabitants is a little misplaced. It will be interesting however, to see how busy new types of urban spaces named Plaza, Bosque or Grove will become, and their integration with the surrounding 19th century city style buildings will be crucial to their success. The only thing that could be called a building inside the City Garden is already nicknamed the Butterfly and disappears with camouflage between flowers inside the rolling hills. Cultural event space is interwoven into the patchwork of recreational and horticultural programme, while similar forms change programme in a pattern that becomes itself a camouflage.

Switching between expectations and reality the design breaks open any preconceived notion of typology – the hybrid form can take on any kind of programme, be it garden, park, theatre or museum. Spaces can remain open, enclosed or covered in concrete or glass. A definition of outdoor design for landscape architecture such as Meto Vroom has attempted is as obsolete here as Smithson’s definition of modernist architecture: the art of designing cubic autonomous objects. This design deliberately and strategically crossed disciplinary borders. It challenges the definitions of either discipline - architecture and landscape architecture – to expand their field of reference.

But what is really remarkable about the Aberdeen competition is the move of the new hybrid of garden and building from the architect’s studio to the portfolio of real estate development. Since the 1990’s many buildings that imitated landscapes where specifically proposed as an alternative among other types of architecture. In other competitions these proposals have been unique among their competitors. Seminal architecture projects with landscape methods like OMA’s Jussieu Libraries Paris (1992-93), FOA’s Yokohama Ferry Terminal (1995-2004) or SANAA’s Rolex Learning Centre...
at EPF Lausanne (2002-2010) all had to compete with box or blob shaped iconic objects of prominent designers in competition phase.

For Aberdeen the brief explicitly asked public ways, green, landscaped and planted garden space in combination with cultural programmes. Already in 1999, Alex Wall had seen a tendency in contemporary design that the carefully guarded disciplinary borders between architecture, landscape architecture and urbanism would slowly become obsolete, evident in cross-disciplinary schemes such OMA’s and Tschumi’s Designs for Parc de la Villette (1982-1998). One of the most landscape-oriented of Mitterand’s grand projects was taken out of the hands of the landscape architectural establishment. Wall also quoted West 8’s Schouwburgplein in Rotterdam (1991-1996) as an example of the border-crossing in the opposite direction: landscape architects designed a public space as an architectural interior, using unfamiliar materials, staged lighting and detachment from the ground. In that same year Kenneth Frampton – inspired by even more classically architectural projects – coined the term megaform for a whole list including the seminal design of Yokohama Ferry Terminal by Foreign Office Architects. Stan Allen also wrote about the ‘Field Condition’, experimenting with crossing disciplinary borders in his own practice.

What was a small breed of seemingly eccentric designers back then - and for some reason misleadingly labeled landscape urbanists for some time - has become a mature form of interdisciplinary practice with a different agenda than just designing buildings. In Architecture it has become obvious that there are new forms of public programmes that have been coined “Landscapers”, “Groundscapes”, “Landform Buildings”, “Groundwork”. I prefer to call them "Architecture with Landscape Methods".

The Aberdeen City Garden Project in a way shows very clearly that public space needs a new breed of designers. Diller, Scofido and Renfro for example have been working persistently on this theme. With West 8 and other partners they had designed the Arteplage Yverdon-les-Bains in Switzerland (1997-2002). Their Blur building - turned out to be the ultimate landscape design piece that transformed the cloudy sky of the natural landscape into a designed artifact, literally and physically blurred the disciplinary order of building types. Later they joined West 8 in the New York Governor’s Island competition (2007) where again they design a spatial visual and sensitive experience in a cave like space, that is hard to separate from a rippling, wavy landscape of immersion.

None of these projects avoids provocation - even though they are still all political balanced. Political strategy and design tactics are needed for New York and Aberdeen alike: the counter movement to preserve the Union Terrace Gardens seemed to take the upper hand during that public exhibition of projects, where it looked for a while as if more people would rather keep the existing urban park than any of the exhibited designs. But with a real vote and accompanying debate, the fortunes of innovation changed. On March 2nd 2012, a referendum was held among 86000 voters (a 52% turnout) lead to 45301 votes for the project. Both the high turnout and the thin majority show that public space is very much an issue of public debate still in contemporary European city – and that is despite of all cultural pessimism a good thing.

Private development of public space is a perennial subject in the history of Britain’s cities. One may think from a continental ”patron state” attitude that such privatization of public space is bad, or argue otherwise that cities would never get a chance to realise such crucial projects without private involvement. One thing is sure: in the Aberdeen of 2012, there is an engaged public debate about public space, and that’s certainly a good starting point for improvement. Another outcome of the blurring of public and private interest is a major shift in the disciplinary division that persisted between
landscape design and architecture. In more and more crucial projects, the disciplinary and typological boundary between landscape and architecture is dissolving. This new interdisciplinary attitude will lead to crucial changes in the design practice and built reality of our future living environments. This process continues via the post-Peak-Oil public landscape of Aberdeen city gardens.

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www.thecitygardenproject.com/videotour.htm

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